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Essence of Trotskyism?

Friday 8 January 2010, by [LE BLANC Paul](#) (Date first published: 5 January 2010).

In response to my critical review of Robert Service's biography of Trotsky [1], a reader of the journal *Links* wrote the following response, with a question and suggestion:

"As usual, a very good article by Paul. I would describe myself as a socialist (or communist) and I think all the usual suspects like Marx, Lenin, Bukharin, Trotsky, Gramsci, Luxemburg, Che etc... are worth studying. So I have a question for Paul — in the second-last paragraph you spell out the essence of Trotsky's theory. But I would argue that all socialists would agree with these three points. What do you think is the essence of Trotskyism that would define it as being different and unique? It seems to me the defining feature of Trotsky is his struggle against Stalin. And on this point, it seems to me, most socialists would agree. Nobody really defends Stalin's criminal distortions."

My response to this follows.

I very much appreciate the reader's positive comments. I hope I will be forgiven for a response that is somewhat less succinct as I express essential agreement while offering additional thoughts.

I agree that the essence of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution (and also of the *Transitional Program*) is consistent with the thinking of Marx and Engels, Luxemburg, Lenin, and Gramsci. In my book "From Marx to Gramsci" I argue (and provide readings to help make the case) that the thinking of these six revolutionaries adds up to a dynamic, internally consistent body of thought that can be called "revolutionary Marxism." The younger, uncompromised Bukharin (prior to 1925) was also very much in this framework. And much in the thinking/actions of Che Guevara (as well as many, many other revolutionaries) also overlaps and intersects with this revolutionary Marxism. I also agree that Trotsky's most distinctive contribution involved his struggle to defend revolutionary Marxism and the Russian Revolution of 1917 from what could be called "Stalin's criminal distortions."

At the same time, within the evolving body of revolutionary Marxism, different revolutionaries came to certain insights and clarifications before others – this is a tradition that could be characterized as involving "uneven and combined development." Also, various comrades gave a distinctive articulation to certain ideas: Gramsci's discussion of "hegemony" and Luxemburg's description of the "mass strike," for example, as well as Lenin's insights on the "revolutionary party" and on the "worker-peasant alliance" come to mind – and this list is hardly exhaustive. Many more essential contributions could be associated with each of these comrades – although rather than making them up out of whole cloth, they were simply drawing from the common pool of conceptualizations associated with revolutionary Marxism, giving them distinctive expression in the face of new experiences. The obvious point should be added that Trotsky had the advantage of living longer than

Marx and Engels, Luxemburg, and Lenin, and of having greater freedom and experience than Gramsci – which enabled him to make certain contributions not allowed to the others.

In this vein, and providing a more extensive list of contributions, I would suggest that Trotsky's "defining features" include the following:

- (1) his development of the theory of uneven and combined development and the related theory of permanent revolution;
- (2) his understanding of the Russian Revolution of 1917, reflected in his actions of that year and in his magnificent three-volume "History of the Russian Revolution";
- (3) his articulation, as a leader of the Communist International, of the united front tactic (along with Lenin and others) to advance the genuine interests of the workers and oppressed;
- (4) his increasingly clear and profound critique, from 1923 onward, of the bureaucratic degeneration within the Soviet Republic, of the authoritarianism that accompanied it, and of the vicious "revolution from above" that had such a devastating impact on the peasantry and working class — and his retrieval of the concept of "workers' democracy" (including, finally, the principle of political pluralism) that had been central to the revolutionary struggles of 1905 and 1917;
- (5) his defense of revolutionary internationalism against the deeply flawed notion of "socialism in one country" – understanding, in the global political economy, the inter-linked fates of the working classes and oppressed peoples of the early Soviet Union with those of the "advanced" capitalist countries and with those in the "under-developed" colonial and semi-colonial regions;
- (6) his revolutionary Marxist analysis of the bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet Union contained in "The Revolution Betrayed," and his exposure of and opposition to the poisonous and murderous characteristics of Stalinism as reflected in the Moscow trials and massive repression in the Soviet Union in the late 1930s;
- (7) his brilliant analysis of fascism and his urgent call for a working-class united front to combat and defeat it;
- (8) his clear and incisive critique of the popular front, with its inherent class-collaborationism and its built-in dynamics of defeat;
- (9) his analysis of the underlying dynamics of World War II which – in contrast to perspectives prevalent within most of the Left – provided the basis for a relatively clear understanding of post-war realities;
- (10) his heroic efforts – against overwhelming odds – to draw an international network of uncorrupted revolutionaries together into a Fourth International, armed with a "transitional program" designed to apply revolutionary Marxist perspectives to the current realities facing them.

Those seeking to convert all of this into a dogmatic "orthodoxy" are doing violence to the critical method that is essential to the revolutionary Marxism of Trotsky himself. He scathingly denounced efforts to devise a common sense of "Trotskyist" tactics to be applied "from Paris to Honolulu." Rather than constructing a special "-ism" that sets him apart, one could argue it would be more useful to emphasize how inseparable his ideas are from those of the other revolutionaries we have mentioned. I think it would be no less a mistake, however, to minimize his contributions. There may be differing views on the limitations of one or another of his distinctive perspectives. That is something that historians can explore and debate – and, in a more important sense, must be sorted

out amid the realities and struggles of the here-and-now.

But there is no question that those engaged in both understanding and changing the world will find Trotsky's writings, as the reader puts it, "worth studying."

Paul Le Blanc

Footnotes

[1] Voir sur ESSF: [Trotsky lives - A review of Robert Service's biography](#)